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Leadership for the New Millennium

Dr. Gary A. Ransdell
President, Western Kentucky University

Association of College Honor Societies
1998 Annual Council Meeting
February 21, 1998
7:00 P.M. Carriage House
Regal Maxwell House, Nashville Tenn.

I've been asked to speak with you on "what is needed to build a more vigorous and robust academic and social opportunity for our students."

One immediate answer is more students like those in the member institutions of the Association of College Honor Societies--mature students who are serious about their subjects and are mapping bright futures who have already experienced the power that knowledge brings, as well a more complete life experience.

The ACHS consists of 65 organizations which represent superior work in broad fields of study. You make up more than eleven thousand active collegiate chapters, and some 4.5 million members, all engaged in a common mission: the development of scholarly leaders.

You maintain very high standards of eligibility for membership and you have achieved a status which is highly valued. You shape the intellectual environment on our campuses. As a consortium you are an extremely impressive group, surrounded by talented minds.

The purposes of your organization, besides bringing you together as a homogeneous group to share mutual matters of intellectual interest, are to maintain high standards and useful functions, and to collect, to publish, and to distribute meaningful information and data.

You represent, both as individuals and as a group, *ultimate scholarship*. The energy of your membership is enormous; the student members' potential for changing the world for the better is unbounded. In a society driven by the values of equality, you represent value in the pursuit to be *unequal*. Excellence means best and brightest. It means rising above the rest. I commend the pursuit to be intellectually unequal.

In an information-driven society--when our knowledge base is advancing, or even doubling every 18 months--some say every nine months--our students need to know not just facts or content, but how to access and effectively utilize that knowledge. This is the old content versus process discussion in education, and we at Western Kentucky University we seek a balance in our mission, especially in the learning experiences for our students.

Our leaders in the next millennium will be prepared for the challenges which await them because they understand that to be learned one must be continually learning. Behind you must come another legion of scholars, and as we move into the 21st century, let me tell you about some exciting opportunities for making higher education more accessible to the good students--the best and the brightest students.

In Kentucky, Governor Paul Patton has proposed to the state General Assembly details of what would be the biggest statewide college-scholarship program based on *academic merit* ever offered in Kentucky.

The Merit-based scholarship program could offer scholarships ranging from \$100 per year for students who did slightly better than average in high school to \$2,500 per year for straight-A students.

That is more than the cost of a year's tuition at Western Kentucky University which is now \$2,140 for in-state undergraduate students.

The proposal would begin phasing in the scholarships for students who begin college in the fall of 1999. The proposed funding source is the Kentucky Lottery, which was begun in 1989 for the purpose of funding education. But I am less interested in the source of funds, and more interested in the philosophical intent to recognize scholarly achievement.

Kentucky's plan is modeled after Georgia's popular HOPE Scholarship Program which was the brainchild of Governor Zell Miller, whose 1990 gubernatorial campaign in Georgia was based on starting a lottery whose proceeds would be used solely for education.

(Any Georgia representatives among you may want to bear with me since you already know this).

Today the HOPE Scholarship Program--HOPE standing for Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally--has awarded more than 300,000 scholarships to Georgia students.

The students eligible for the scholarships have to be Georgia residents, 1996 or later high school graduates who have completed high school with a "B" average. They have to maintain a "B" average in college.

The program has worked.

In 1993, the year the HOPE Scholarships were started, there were 268,000 students enrolled in the 34 public colleges and universities in the Georgia higher education system.

In 1996, three years later, that number had increased to 292,000--an increase of 24,000 students.

This increase was in great measure due to the availability of HOPE scholarships, according to officials at the Georgia Student Finance Commission, which oversees the various types of HOPE scholarships.

How has the quality of freshman classes in Georgia improved?

The year before HOPE, the average grade point average of an entering freshman at a public university or college in Georgia was 2.70.

In 1994-95, the average G.P.A. Was up to 2.74.

In the year 1992-93, the year before HOPE, SAT composite scores for freshmen entering public higher education in Georgia averaged 843.

In 1994-95 the composite had increased to 857.

These are the latest statistics the Commission has right now, but they estimate the numbers will be even higher, once more recent numbers are in. They do not yet have private school statistics.

A year after the HOPE program began, here is what people were saying about it:

The Los Angeles Times: "HOPE is...the most far-reaching state scholarship project in the nation."

The Philadelphia Inquirer, June 9, 1996: "Zell Miller's HOPE scholarship is the kind of thing you look at half in amazement and half in anger, and wonder why your own bonehead state didn't think of it!"

If the Kentucky General Assembly passes our governor's proposal, the Merit-Based Scholarship Program in Kentucky will join the state of Georgia's successful program of recruiting and keeping our best and brightest students on our campuses throughout Kentucky.

One of our legislators, Senator Tim Shaughnessy of Louisville, proposed the idea of Merit-Based Scholarships in Kentucky, based upon Georgia's program, saying the idea would do for current and future students "what the GI Bill did for their grandfathers."

The program in Kentucky would work in a way similar to Georgia's.

The scholarship program would be phased in and would be redeemable at institutions of higher learning in Kentucky including private colleges, state universities, community colleges and technical schools.

High school students would earn scholarship credits for each year of high school in which they earn A's or B's. The proposal calls for the accumulation of points for each A and each B from the ninth through the 12th grade.

Scholarship amounts would offer the maximum of \$2,500 per year of college.

This is for a student who gets a 4.0 average in each year in high school and a score of 28 or better on the ACT test. Students then retain, add to, or reduce their scholarship level by the number of A's and B's they earn in their first four years of college.

The bottom line? If you're a good student, Kentucky will pay your way to school, regardless of your family income, but you must continue to perform well to keep or enhance your merit scholarship in college.

The primary difference between the *proposed* program in Kentucky and the *proven* program in Georgia is pressure...on students, faculty and on parents. In Georgia, it's all or nothing with a B average -- pressure in that senior year.

In Kentucky, an A or B is worth a few dollars. It is the cumulative impact which pays off. Consistent excellence is rewarded.

Universities like Western will significantly benefit from these leaders of the 21st century who access our programs and faculty for their higher learning

experience.

Scholarships like Georgia's HOPE and Kentucky's proposed Merit-Based program, provide a significant incentive for our top scholars to remain in Kentucky and to take advantage of our excellent institutions. We all win.

What excites me the most about the emergence of publicly-funded merit scholarship programs is the reduction of financial obstacles for academically gifted students. If the best students begin picking their college or university based on strength of faculty, quality of curriculum and character of campus, and less on financial capacity, then those campuses with the best faculty, the most meaningful curricula, and the best-equipped and maintained facilities will get the best students--in spite of limited campus resources. And isn't that the way it *should* be?

We find ourselves in a time when there is an escalation of costs for attending college, and students and parents are faced with affordability issues as we have never had to face before.

A Jan. 30 story in The Chronicle of Higher Education says "Colleges risk an erosion of public trust if their charges continue to soar," and the National Commission on the cost of Higher Education warned that if colleges and universities can't keep their costs down, Congress may be forced to intervene.

The Commission said that colleges must redouble their efforts to cut costs and keep tuition affordable, and offer more disclosure to the public about why their costs are rising, as a way of helping students and their parents understand better why institutions charge what they do.

In addition, the Commission also urged the Education Department to release data every year on trends in college costs.

Finding ways to make higher education more accessible--how ever that might be defined by a given institution--to our students in the future is one of our biggest challenges in the next millennium.

Distance learning, electronic transmission and extended campus programming will largely define how many campuses measure accessibility--and we all must pursue innovative ways to offer relevant degree programs and workforce development opportunities in ways convenient to a broad range of students.

I absolutely and unequivocally DO NOT AGREE with the futurists' view that the college campus as we know it today will disappear in 30 years and be fully replaced with a totally technologically-driven delivery system.

Human interaction, the exchange of ideas and ideals *will* and *must* drive the educational process--and experiences such as those provided in the scholarly societies you represent will be paramount in a meaningful post secondary experience!

The Commonwealth of Kentucky has made leaps in progress with the passage of the Postsecondary Education Improvement Act last May which reorganizes the state's priorities the funding of higher education.

Again, proposed by Kentucky Governor Paul Patton, House Bill One, as we call it, has been said to be "one of the most significant pieces of legislation enacted in modern Kentucky history."

The bill confirms the commitment of Kentucky's leadership to higher education in Kentucky, and even more, it confirms the relationship between higher education and the future economic capacity of our state.

Even before he took office, Kentucky's governor had recognized that despite recent growth in the state's economy, Kentucky continues to be a relatively low-income state.

The new legislation enacted to change this offers opportunity for better quality and more accessible educational opportunities, along with a plan to recoup some of the budget reduction Kentucky higher education has endured over the last 15 years.

But new money for higher education will have to be earned. House Bill One requires campuses to reallocate internal funds, generate sponsored research and raise philanthropic support in order to penetrate the matching incentive funds made available through new legislation.

I tell you this to illustrate that the connection between state leadership and higher education in Kentucky is strong, and that the state's leaders recognize the need to encourage scholarly achievement and scholarly research, that academic excellence paves the way for economic development and an enhanced quality of life--and that the presidents of the eight universities in Kentucky are dedicated to the effective use of public money and to depoliticizing the appropriation process.

Tomorrow's leaders--your members-- must work to make strong connections where they live and where they work, and where they choose to raise their families.

Your commitment to leadership, to the power of scholarship, and the challenge to be intellectually unequal must include ways to fully expose the learning process to others, and to enhance the quality of life for those who follow your lead. As you say it so well in the title of your organization's own publication:

It's A Matter of Honor.